

Propaganda

Men carried on fighting in the war despite the dreadful conditions. This was partly because people on both sides of the war were exposed to propaganda, or slanted information.

How was propaganda used in the war?

There was no public radio or television during the First World War, and most information was published in newspapers, which were censored by governments and military authorities. This censorship took various forms:

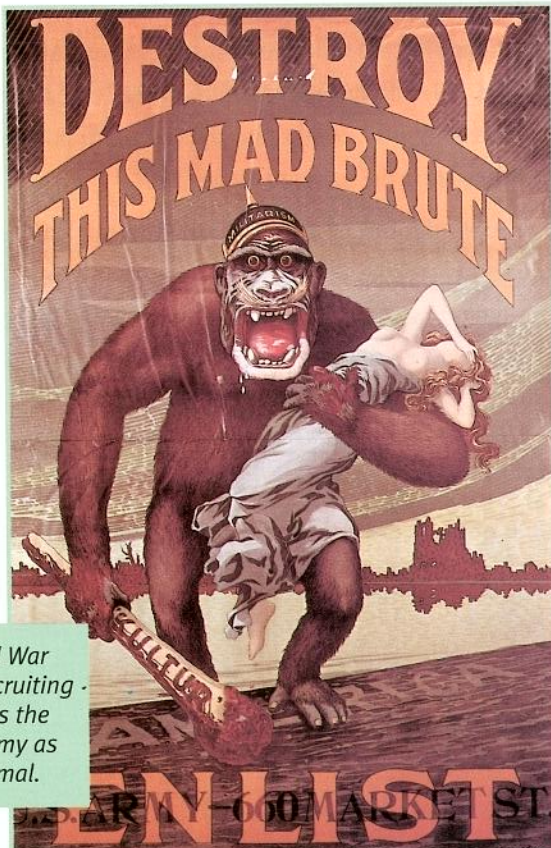
- > Bad news was suppressed. For example, the German casualty figures for the Battle of the Marne were never published.
- > The courage of the national armies was exaggerated. One Paris newspaper told its readers that 'our troops laugh at machine guns now ... nobody pays the slightest attention to them'.
- > Each side portrayed its enemies as evil and brutal.

THE BELLS OF ANTWERP

The famous case of the 'martyred' clergymen of Antwerp in Belgium is a good example of how propaganda developed during the war.

- > A newspaper in Cologne in Germany reported that, after the fall of Antwerp in August 1914, bells were rung in churches throughout Germany.
- > The Parisian newspaper *Le Matin* reported that the clergy of Antwerp were forced by victorious German troops to ring their own church bells.
- > In London, *The Times* newspaper reported that clergymen who had refused to ring their bells after the fall of Antwerp had been arrested.
- > The Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* in Milan reported that Belgian priests had been sentenced to hard labour for refusing to ring their bells to celebrate the German victory.
- > *Le Matin* reported that Belgian clergymen who had refused to ring their bells were tied upside down inside the bells and used as human clappers.

SOURCE A



A First World War American recruiting poster shows the German enemy as a crazed animal.

SOURCE B



Germany defends her shores. The caption reads 'God punish England'.

SOURCE C

There were many accounts of atrocities, such as the following Canadian crucifixion story.

On May 15th, *The Times* reported ... during the battle at Ypres in April, troops had discovered the body of a Canadian soldier, crucified on a Belgian barn door, with German bayonets piercing his hands and feet. The story was almost certainly untrue but grew in the telling. Four days after the report in *The Times* a Canadian private wrote to his wife that it was not one but six Canadians who had been crucified. The next time the unit was in combat 'our officers told us to take no prisoners, shoot the bastards or bayonet them'. A bronze frieze exhibited in London showed German soldiers beneath the crucifix smoking and throwing dice.

Martin Gilbert, *The First World War*, 1994

SOURCE D

Another atrocity story described a 'German corpse factory'.

One such invention is the famous story of the 'German Corpse Factory', initiated in a report in London in *The Times* on 16th April 1917. This noted that 'one of the United States consuls, on leaving Germany in February, stated in Switzerland that the Germans were distilling glycerine from bodies of the dead'. This was followed by a report from a German correspondent about a 'Corpse Exploitation Establishment'. The author of this lie was probably Brigadier-General Sir John Charteris, head of British Military Intelligence. Some years after the war he admitted that he had produced the story, simply by switching the captions of two photographs: one showing Germans removing their dead for burial; the other showing horses' corpses on their way to a soap factory.

J. M. Winter, *The Experience of World War 1*, 1988

SOURCE E



This makeshift but powerful piece of propaganda was put up by the Coventry War Aims Committee.

>> Activity

What impact might these atrocity stories have had on people in Britain?